Disability Visibility Podcast

Episode 11: Disabled People in Public Service

Guests: Maria Town and Walei Sabry

Host: Alice Wong

Transcript by Cheryl Green

For more information: https://disabilityvisibilityproject.com/podcast/

Introduction

[radio static, voices singing with hip-hop beat]

LATEEF: This is the Disability Visibility Podcast with your host, Alice Wong.

ALICE WONG: Hey everyone, my name is Alice Wong, and I'm the host of the disability visibility podcast, conversations on disability politics, culture, and media. We're gonna get political today and focus on disabled people in public service.

Most major cities have a Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, also called a MOPD. This episode is a tale of two cities as I talk with Maria Town and Walei Sabry, two people who work at the MOPD for the City of Houston and New York City. You'll hear how Maria and Walei got involved in public service, what they do day-to-day, and the major issues facing the disability community in their cities, and the power of local leadership and government.

Are you ready? Away we go!

[electronic beeping]

ELECTRONIC VOICE: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1!

ALICE: So, Walei and Maria, thank you so much for joining me today. Why don't you both tell me a little bit about yourself?

MARIA TOWN: Thank you so much for having me, Alice. My name is Maria Town, and currently, I serve as the Director of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities for the City of Houston.

WALEI SABRY: Thanks for having me, Alice. I am Walei Sabry, and I'm the Digital Accessibility Coordinator at the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities in New York City.

How did you get here, and did you have a background in public service?

ALICE: So, it's really exciting to hear that both of you are working in a Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. So, I wanna ask you both, how did you get to where you are now, and did you have a background in public service before?

MARIA: I had a background in public service before I started this job. Prior to starting my role as the Director of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities in Houston, I was the Disability Community Liaison and a Senior Advisor for Public Engagement in the White House Office of Public Engagement under President Barak Obama. And prior to that, I was a Policy Advisor at

the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy on their Youth Policy Team. And I've always been really committed to public service, and I've, again, been in public service in a variety of roles. So, my job ended the day that President Trump took office, and so, when I was working at the White House, I knew that I had to find another job. And the people close to the mayor of Houston called me and said that they were looking for a Director of the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. I was actually pretty concerned: Moving from Washington D.C. to Texas is a major transition. But also, I'd worked at the federal level for almost seven years, and transitioning to working at a local level is also a big change. So, I was a little bit hesitant, but I came down, I met with the mayor. I was extremely impressed by him and the kinds of questions that he asked and the way that he understood disability. And I was also impressed by Houston and exactly what it is as a city. So, I've been here for six months.

ALICE: That's awesome. Thank you. How about you, Walei?

WALEI: Yeah, so, I don't have a background in any kind of public service before I started. I got my Master's in Disability Studies around 2012, and for the next three years, I just did what I liked, mostly for free. So, I would take part in community organizing events, and then I worked a lot in assistive technology and teaching folks. From there, things slowly started to take off for me, and by 2014, I was working at a start-up part-time doing customer support, but also, doing accessibility consulting for them on their web. And then, in 2015, I was offered a job at the Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. I was the Housing Coordinator, and I loved it because I basically was in a position to do things about all the stuff I had learned about in my Disability Studies graduate degree. And it was very exciting for me to be helping folks transition out of nursing homes and figuring out how to get accessible materials or whatever they needed. A local law was passed in 2016, you know, addressed website accessibility for New York City agency websites. So, I was in a pretty good position, once the Digital Accessibility Coordinator position opened up. I started in December of 2016, and it's been a great ride.

ALICE: That's really exciting.

Misconceptions about working for city government and Maria and Walei's accomplishments

ALICE: I feel like there's a lot of misconceptions out there, cynicism about working for government. What do you both think in terms of the misconceptions about working for city government?

MARIA: So, Alice, I'll actually add a whole layer of cynicism to that. I'm really privileged in that I get to run in circles of kind of radical disability rights advocates. And so, there's an additional layer of cynicism that I have somehow sold out. And oftentimes, when I'm speaking in a professional capacity to these groups, I have to say, "Hello! I'm the Man! And if you knew me, you'd know that that's not the case." So, I actually think that you can do quite a bit of good stuff from working for city government.

I'm also a huge proponent of the idea that we need both receptive advocates on the inside working together with advocates on the outside who are pushing government to be better. Because without the two working together, we won't make quick progress.

I also think that in working for local government, you can have a lot of really phenomenal success or achievements. Just to give you an example, we'd had this elderly man with a disability who had been without air conditioning for three weeks in Houston. In August. That's a dire situation, and he'd reported it to his landlord. He'd reported it to his housing complex

ownership. And usually, by the time people call our MOPD, our Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities, they've already called as many people as you can think of. And yet, all it took was us contacting the right people to get two air conditioners installed in his home within a mere matter of hours.

ALICE: Wow.

MARIA: Yeah.

WALEI: That's amazing.

ALICE: That's gotta feel good.

MARIA: It really did. And I'll be honest: It's easy for me and my staff to get sort of low because there's so much need. And I think that's true across the nation. But often, or sometimes, you'll get these kind of smaller wins that can help you work to improve larger systems.

Also, from a slightly different perspective, one of the things that I learned working at the federal level was that we often depended on local examples to drive progress. And so, the question would always be, OK, if we wanna reform the criminal justice system for people with disabilities or improve employment practices for people with disabilities, what are the states doing? What are the cities doing? Who are the best in that group, and how can we model practices and policies after the states and cities?

WALEI: Definitely, my first year working for MOPD, I was not prepared for the target that was gonna be on my back and my front and my side. Working for the government is not a glamorous job. And in a city like New York that is highly opinionated, once somebody finds out--and I was fairly new--once somebody finds out that I'm working for the city, or I'm working for MOPD, they really wanted to take that opportunity to tell me what a crappy job we're doing and how we're useless, and how we don't do anything. And I think there is a huge disconnect between what is realistically possible from a small agency like ours, and what is expected from the city and from an agency like ours. And a lot of the stuff that we do, unfortunately, goes by unnoticed. Like you said, things that are on a smaller scale.

Something that I accomplished as the Housing Coordinator that I'm very proud of is there's lots of cases of people with disabilities, and housing is not great in New York City, especially for people with disabilities. We're going through a housing crisis in New York City. And there was a particular person I was working with that was stuck in a nursing home and had these very specific parameters of where they wanted to live. Ultimately, what worked, that person had applied for affordable housing in the area of their choice, and they were rejected on the basis of income, which I was able to follow up on and reverse the rejection. It was appealed, and that person finally got the apartment that they needed, and they moved out into the community after being in a nursing home for about two or three years. This is a young person in their 20s and 30s, late 20s. So, small changes like that, nobody hears about them.

ALICE: There's no press release about that.

MARIA: There's no press release about that one person that we helped. And there was other cases like that. Demand is great, and we do what we can. We serve--we're about 15 people--we serve about almost a million people with disabilities in New York City. So, needless to say, our phones are ringing off the hook.

[chill-out reggae]

Other major issues facing disability community in your cities: Transportation, home care, and housing

ALICE: So, both Houston and New York City clearly are major cities in the United States with very diverse populations, and both of you have talked about housing. But what are some other major issues facing the disability community in your cities that we haven't talked about yet?

MARIA: One of the major issues facing people with disabilities in Houston, and I'm gonna go ahead and say facing all Houstonians, is access to accessible public rights of way. I'm talking sidewalks, crosswalks, curb cuts, things like that. Houston is like many other major cities in that it does not maintain its own sidewalks. So, it is the responsibility of the abutting property owner to maintain that particular section of sidewalks. And what this does is it creates a kind of patchwork network of sidewalks that range in quality when it comes to accessibility. Thankfully, I think many entities within the city are sensitive to this issue. The infrastructure issues related to sidewalks and roads are huge issues for the disability community. And not only just for classic public rights of way issues like sidewalks, even when we think about something like driverless cars, autonomous vehicles. These vehicles that will allow people like Walei and I to drive, as folks who currently are not able to get licenses. We'll still be driving around on aging infrastructure. And so, I think questions like that are huge for the disability community.

WALEI: Right, and we do have some similar but not exactly the same issues here in New York City in terms of transportation, access to transportation. So, we do maintain our own sidewalks and streets, and that does alleviate some of those problems that you mentioned that you are experiencing in Houston. But we still do a get a number of complaints about curb cuts. And when it comes to transportation, we have our subway system, which is pretty old. And I think there's probably--there is--there's a recent lawsuit again against the MTA in New York City to include more elevators in their stations. We do get a lot of complaints about that, and we have our paratransit system. It's supposed to be the alternative, I guess, for people who can't use the subway. And we might as well be getting unlimited complaints about Access-A-Ride. That's one of our issues is transportation, and we are doing things to improve our situation here in New York City. Some of the things that we are working on are having accessible pedestrian signals so that people can cross the street safely. We have the detectable warning strips on each curb cut so that folks who are blind, such as myself, know that they are approaching the crosswalk. And I do find that helpful. And we're actually looking towards the future as well in terms of building accessible smart cities and using things like Bluetooth beacons for wayfinding and having tactile guideways on sidewalks so that folks who are blind can navigate on the sidewalks more efficiently and easily. And this is very important because employment is a problem for people with disabilities, and part of that problem is people can't get to work because transportation is not accessible. So, those are just some of the problems that we have here and that we're working on.

MARIA: Alice, one more thing I just wanna make sure gets mentioned is related to long-term services and supports in Home and Community-Based services. There was a recent report that Texas faces a critical shortage of personal care attendants.

ALICE: Yes, I read that article!

MARIA: Yeah, and I think it's accurate. Houston has the second-largest population of seniors in the country and among the largest populations of people with disabilities in the country. And our community has fought to get out of nursing homes and to never be put into nursing homes. So, I

think across the country, a shortage in personal care attendants as well as a shortage in kind of means of paying for personal care services is a huge issue facing the disability community, and one that we are currently trying to figure out how to improve as a city in Houston.

ALICE: Yeah, I read that article that said basic pay rate was $8.00 an hour?

MARIA: Yeah, something like that. I think it might be a little bit higher.

ALICE: That's pretty horrific to think about the labor that's really undervalued by our society. Because the home care workforce is predominantly women, women of color, immigrants.

WALEI: And from our side here in New York City, I believe it was last year, there was some kind of laws passed to actually raise the wages of home care workers here in New York City. And I think there's also now family members could become, could get paid for taking care of their other family members.

[upbeat accordion music]

Concerns and fears from disabled immigrants

ALICE: You know, another issue I've been thinking about lately is immigration, deportation, and surveillance, especially under this current administration. So, I wanna ask you both, what have you been hearing and leaning from disabled immigrants who may or may not be undocumented? But what are their concerns and fears?

WALEI: New York City, I mean, New York City's a big city for immigrants, obviously. And we're lucky enough to have a mayor that is supportive of that community and comes out speaking strong and defending the immigrant community and making sure that they feel welcome in New York City. When it comes to the intersectionality of disability and immigrant status, I have not personally dealt with a lot of that. In serving our constituents, though, I did get calls from people who are undocumented, and a big concern is services. They don't qualify for a lot of the services that are available because of their undocumented status. But that being said, with immigrants that are documented or not, we have a really big population of people that are immigrants in New York City, obviously, and we make that a part of our focus as a service provider. We passed a law last year that mandates everything has to be available, all literature and websites and anything the city puts out there has to be available in seven different languages. We're also focusing more on using plain language because English is not the native language for a lot of people in New York City.

MARIA: This is a rough one in particular for a city in Texas. Houston, by many measure, is the most diverse city in the country. We have an enormous population of immigrants, a huge population of Latinx Americans and immigrants and undocumented people, and the largest number of refugees in the country. And there's also a really strong, vibrant network of undocumented people with disabilities here in Houston. So, one of the things that I have heard and dealt with is that many people with disabilities try to immigrate to the United States because there is more opportunity here for disabled people, and specifically, disabled children than in other parts of the world. So, many undocumented families came here because they had a child with a disability, and they knew their child could go to school here. So, many families, many undocumented families in Houston are wondering how that affects them because their kids who are in the school system can stay, I'm pretty sure. So, one of the things they're worried about is being separated from their family.

The other thing that I've seen the network of undocumented people here in Houston do very effectively--and if they had more resources, they could do it more effectively--is get folks access to medical supplies. So, a lot of the times, we'll see folks who were injured in a construction job or were in a car accident or became disabled as a result of some form of violence, but they're undocumented. So, not only do they not qualify for services, but they cannot get access to things like wheelchairs or leg bags or other forms of assistive technology that would enable them to live day-to-day. And there's an amazing network of folks that helps provide medical supplies to people with disabilities who otherwise can't afford them.

And the last thing, and this is directly what MOPD is doing, the Houston MOPD has partnered with a couple of pro bono legal providers to provide legal assistance to people with disabilities. One of our providers is now offering immigration law services for free.

ALICE: That's great.

MARIA: Also, I should mention: So, in Texas, we had a bill called Senate Bill 4, SB4, and that was a bill banning sanctuary cities. And Houston, along with, I think, every other major city in Texas had sued the state over that bill. And the mayor and the Chief of Police, Art Acevedo, have spoken out against the bill banning sanctuary cities.

Mayors speaking out against the current federal administration

ALICE: You know, I do feel that in this particular administration right now, Mayors are really speaking out, clearly rebuking many of the positions and decisions made by our current leadership. So, any thoughts about that?

WALEI: I personally am happy to see that happening because our Mayor is publicly representing the interests of the local city. We're a city of immigrants, and you know, yeah. I mean, for me, that's my short answer. Just that it makes me happy that people are not afraid to stand out and just speak their opinions and what they believe in and go against what is the federal government right now, I guess [chuckles].

MARIA: Yes! So, I would not have left D.C. and my life there if I did not believe in the power of Mayors and the power of Mayors to make a difference and to impact change. I completely agree with what you said, Alice, in that Mayors have the ability to speak out and to kind of change the current.

I've been really proud that Mayor Sylvester Turner has been able to speak out on so many things. In addition to speaking out against the anti-sanctuary cities law, he's spoken out against the President's withdrawal from the climate agreement. And he's spoken out to fight to keep Medicaid and to keep the Affordable Care Act intact. And these were things that I worked on when I was at the White House!

I think that it's really important for Mayors to represent the interests of their constituents because they're the people who see what Americans want day in and day out. And mayors make things happen, would be a kind of shorthand way to put it.

[mellow music]

Advice for disabled people interested in public service

ALICE: What's your advice for disabled people who are interested and curious about becoming involved in public service in some form or another?

WALEI: My advice would be really get involved in the community. The way that I ended up in public service is because my love of just doing things in the community: Community organizing or working for free a lot of the time or volunteering. And eventually, people are noticing you, and they're learning who you are and what you're doing. It provides for great networking opportunities. And on a long enough timeline, if you do that, somebody will definitely notice your skills, and you will actually get a chance to hone your skills during those times. And I mentioned this earlier: From 2012 to 2015, I didn't have any steady employment. I mainly just did the things that I loved, and most of the time, it was for free. And you know, not everyone can do that, and I totally understand that. But the importance that I'm stressing here is to just really to try to be involved in as many organizations or initiatives that represent the things that you love doing or want to do.

MARIA: I think that Walei's advice is really wonderful advice. I think that people with disabilities need to be involved in every aspect of public service. And this is one thing I really like to remind people of: Public service is so broad. I live in Houston where we send people to space. Do you want to send people to space? Become a public servant. Are you interested in roads of the future, quite literally? Become a public servant. Are you interested in climate change and making sure that we take care of our planet? Become a public servant. And I think it's awesome that there are roles within cities and states and in the federal government that are specific to disability, but we need people with disabilities across every single role.

And in addition to all of the advice that Walei shared, which again, I think is great, I think it's really important to stress that you should know your stuff. If you are passionate about finance, and you're a person with a disability, be able to talk about municipal finance structures as well as how disability impacts your perspective and what your experiences as a person with disabilities has been like. One of the things that I see happen frequently is that young people with disabilities think that their personal experience with their disability is enough. And while that is exceptionally valuable, in most cases in a public service role, even if you're in a disability-specific one, you are working across disability. And I'd be interested, Walei, in what you have to say. 'Cause even though I'm someone with cerebral palsy, I have to be thinking about folks who are blind, about folks who are deaf, about older folks who may have had a stroke, about people with autism. And their experiences may not be similar to mine.

WALEI: Yeah, I mean, I definitely support that idea. The cross-disability alliances and being able to work with other types of disabilities is really important. And I've seen this a lot in organizations that are great advocates for a specific community, really great advocates, let's say, for the blind community and really don't get it when it comes to other disabilities. And you know, I'll notice this in the way that they might make jokes or the way that they might talk about another disability. I think it's a shame when that happens because we really are all fighting for the same thing, you know? We are fighting for access and equality and inclusion. And when we just focus on our specific, individual needs, it's, in a way, selfish. Because how are we expecting other people to address our needs or help us out with access if we're not also reaching out and doing the same thing? So, we do make sure that if we are holding an event, it is in a physically accessible location. But beyond that, of course, we go out of our way to have any sort of documentation in alternative formats. Or let's actually call them accessible formats.

Wrap-up

ALICE: Well, thank you both so much. I really enjoyed listening to both of you and really learning a lot.

WALEI: Thank you for having us! It was a pleasure.

MARIA: Yeah, thank you, Alice.

["Dance Off" hip hop song]

ALICE: This podcast is a production of the Disability Visibility Project, an online community dedicated to creating, sharing, and amplifying disability media and culture.

All episodes, including text transcripts, are available at DisabilityVisibilityProject.com/Podcast.

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Thanks for listening, and I'll see ya on the Internets! Bye!

♪ ass to the max ya

disconnect your booty

ask all the macks you don't disrespect your duty

on the black top, cat walk, Colfax, wax on

hoe strut, pole dance, romance, hats off ♪